

Foster Care Youth in Transition: How to Help Mitigate Risks of Homelessness Faced by Teens and Emerging Adults in the Foster Care System¹

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In Florida, 60% of children in foster care age out of the system (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018). The risk of homelessness is a common problem for youth aging out of the foster care system (Kelly, 2020). This article discusses multiple problems that youth encounter after they exit foster care, and the ways that almost anyone can work to help these young people. This article offers helpful information for volunteers or policymakers who want to become involved.

Understanding the Foster Care Emancipation Process

Youth in the foster care system who are not adopted or reunited with their families stay in the system until emancipation or “aging out.” This transition to emerging adulthood is a new development stage where youth transition from adolescent to adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). Many are unprepared for independent living and find themselves with a lower level of academic achievement and employment rates, increased dependency on public assistance, and increased rates of poverty compared to peers who are not in the foster care system. Housing instability and homelessness are increasing among emancipated foster care youth compared to peers who live with families (Kelly, 2020).

Homelessness

Youth who age out of foster care are a subset of more than 500,000 people in the United States who are homeless. The majority, 70%, are individuals living on their own. The remaining 30% are families with children (<https://end-homelessness.org>). Homelessness is a public health crisis that presents an ongoing challenge. Homelessness can have negative effects on mental, physical, and emotional health. Communities often struggle to address related financial, health, and social/emotional impacts (Fowler et al., 2019).

Identified Risk Factors That Contribute to Youth Homelessness

What issues confront youth who age out of the system? Multiple risk factors contribute to becoming homeless, including structural, relational, and systemic factors. **Structural factors** include inadequate income, lack of affordable housing, rental discrimination, foreclosure, and lack of education. **Relational factors** include failed relationships, domestic violence, child abuse, poor mental health, death of a loved one, and addiction. **Systemic factors** contributing to homelessness include inadequate access to mental health support and medical care (<https://ofhsoupkitchen.org/>).

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Fifty percent of the homeless population nationwide were formerly in foster care (O’Neale, 2015). Moreover, 40%–50% of foster care youth who age out of the system experience homelessness within 18 months. Yoshioka-Maxwell and Rice (2020) found that 37.75% of 184 homeless youth in their study were former foster care youth who first became homeless after aging out of the system. Sanctity of Hope reports (<https://thesoh.org/>) that 65% of youth in the foster care system require immediate housing at the time of emancipation, without which many become homeless. One way to help mitigate the homelessness crisis is through affordable housing and housing support (Hsu et al., 2019).

What are the consequences of youth homelessness?

The consequences of youth homelessness can be debilitating. Homeless adolescents experience a wide range of damaging physical, mental, and emotional problems. Negative outcomes include but are not limited to poor mental health, substance abuse, criminal activity, sex trafficking, failure to graduate high school, and persistent unemployment (National Network for Youth, 2008).

These outcomes can have long-lasting effects on health. Many homeless youth experience physical and sexual assault that makes them more reluctant or unable to trust adults. They often engage in survival sex work to survive on the streets, which increases their risk of becoming victims of sex trafficking. This can also lead to high rates of sexually transmitted infections and diseases among this population. Up to 40% of homeless youth are affected by sexually transmitted infections (Beharry, 2012). Malnutrition is widespread among homeless youth. The obesity rate is estimated to be at 50% due to reliance on fast food and food pantries for their nourishment. Overall mental illness is present at a reported rate of up to 89% in homeless youth (Merscham et al., 2009). Moreover, mental health problems are sometimes a contributing factor to becoming homeless. In turn, experiencing homelessness and higher exposure to trauma and violence can worsen mental health problems. Reported rates of suicidal ideation among homeless youth have been as high as eighty percent, with two-thirds of this vulnerable population reporting suicide attempts (Beharry, 2012).

A study of more than 1,000 youth exiting foster care found that almost 25% became homeless within one year (Dworsky et al., 2013). The study identified several risk factors for homelessness.

Race: African American youth were 1.8 times more likely to become homeless.

Household composition: Youth who are parents are more than twice as likely to become homeless.

Recent history of homelessness: Youth who had been homeless or who received housing assistance in the past year were nearly twice as likely to become homeless.

School placement: Youth who frequently changed schools—particularly those who changed schools more than four times in three academic years—were nearly twice as likely to become homeless.

Number of foster care placements: Having more than one foster care placement increased a youth’s likelihood of experiencing homelessness by 1.5 times.

Justice system involvement: Youth with multiple convictions (four or more) and youth who had been in juvenile rehabilitation were 1.5 times more likely to become homeless (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

Protective factors that have been identified for youth in the foster care system are a connection with a caring adult, a high GPA, remaining in foster care until age 19, and being placed with a foster family member who serves as a caregiver in the foster care system (Grattan et al., 2022). Less than 50% of youth in the foster care system graduate from high school or obtain a GED before they are emancipated (Segermark, 2017). More than half of the children and youth in the foster care system are school aged. Research with nationally representative samples of school-aged youth (assume ages six to 17 since no specific age was provided, and high school students typically graduate at age 18 but can legally terminate at age 16) in foster care has found that a supportive and positive elementary to high school education experience can negate some of the vulnerabilities to which foster care youth are exposed, such as low graduation rates and poor academic achievement (US Department of Education, 2016).

What programs are in place to address the issue?

In 2001, the McKinney-Vento Act was reauthorized under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act expanded the definition of homeless children to include those in shared housing, awaiting foster care placement, and living in a shelter, a hotel/motel, or inadequate location (Pavlakakis & Duffield,

2017). The expansion improved access to much-needed services.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is a federal law established to provide certain education-related rights for homeless children and youth (<https://nche.ed.gov/>). The program allocates funding nationally each year for the purpose of providing resources to eligible students to support academic success. The support provided includes:

- Immediate school enrollment without requiring records
- Right to remain in the school of origin despite living outside of the district
- Transportation services to and from school of origin
- Support services for academic success

This provides support to reduce the negative effects associated with frequently changing schools. Negative effects of frequent school changes include reduced academic performance, increased absenteeism, and increased dropout rates (Losinski et al., 2013).

The state of Florida has worked to help foster care youth to pursue higher education by providing tuition and fee exemptions at public colleges and universities as well as counseling supports and stipends while they complete their post-secondary education. Eligible recipients have until age 28 to use their education benefit at a participating institution of higher learning (floridacollegeaccess.org, 2022).

The Hope Florida initiative, implemented by the Florida Department of Children and Families, announced an expansion of their services in August 2022. The program offers “hope navigators” to help individuals identify goals and barriers to self-sufficiency and to provide referrals to community-based service partners. This is part of an effort to maximize resources, break down barriers to success, and provide a pathway to prosperity for at-risk individuals and families (A Pathway to Prosperity—Florida Department of Children and Families, 2022).

What are ways to potentially improve the system?

Youth who experience homelessness usually fall into one of two categories: those experiencing homelessness with their families, and those who are unaccompanied such as run-aways or youth aging out of the foster care system (Aratani, 2009). Identifying ways to reduce the risk of homelessness can be challenging. Developing research-based interventions that could potentially reduce the risk of homelessness

and increase positive outcomes for foster care youth will contribute to an evidence-base with long-term expectations of the reduction of homelessness among adults. The foster care system has approximately 25,000 youth exiting the system each year (Bender et al., 2015). Identifying current programs and their potential to address the needs of emancipated youth will inform future interventions for a successful and sustainable aging-out process. The emancipation process currently poses extraordinary challenges for youth who may not have received enough preparation for adulthood, including the means to support themselves financially after exiting the foster care system (Bender et al., 2015).

What can social workers, counselors, educators, and advocates do to prepare youth for emancipation?

Current research on risk and protective factors for the ability of emancipated foster care youth to transition to successful independent living can inform interventions and perhaps even policies to help youth in the transition process to sustainable independence. Policies extending the foster care age until 21 have been shown to reduce the risk of homelessness, at least in the short term (Dworsky et al., 2009). This finding supports advocating for legislation for much-needed funding to protect and better prepare foster care youth for their independence. Advocacy for extending the foster care emancipation age to 21 could include promoting legislation for public funding at the local, state, and federal levels as well as tapping into philanthropic programs sponsored by organizations within both for-profit and nonprofit sectors with support services.

Volunteering with youth is an excellent way to be a positive role model for this vulnerable population. Positive youth development programs that seek volunteers include:

- Big Brothers Big Sisters of America
- Boys & Girls Clubs of America

Volunteer organizations that work specifically with youth in foster care include:

- Guardian ad Litem
- Annie E. Casey Foundation
- Fostering Hope Florida

These are just a few of the organizations that promote positive youth development. Many programs offer reduced or no-cost participation for those with a financial need. Bringing awareness to supportive policies such as the McKinney-Vento Act and available financial support with positive youth development programs will provide extra support to navigate these vulnerable youth towards sustained success.

Conclusion

As youth who grew up in the foster care system approach adulthood, they face certain challenges that accompany emancipation. To best prepare them for successful independent living, it is necessary to use verifiable research on both risk and protective factors that impact this transition. Such research can inform policies and intervention practices to provide at-risk youth with evidence-based support to reduce risks of low graduation rates and low job attainment—both of which can contribute to higher incidents of incarceration. Emancipated youth who are prepared to care for themselves are much more likely to thrive as productive and fulfilled members of society. Caring adults serve as a safety net for this vulnerable population. Furthering research, volunteering, and bringing awareness to the issue are just a few ways to make a positive change and reduce the risk of homelessness for former foster care youth.

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Resources

Foster Focus Magazine (<https://fosterfocusmag.com/articles/foster-care-and-homelessness>) provides information focused entirely on the foster care industry. It also has links and resources about foster care from agencies, government sources, blogs, publications, causes, and organizations.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness (<https://end-homelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2021/>) is a nonprofit focused on ending homelessness in the United States. They have learning resources, publications, data, and current statistics on homelessness in the US.

Fostering Hope in Florida (<https://www.fosteringhopeflorida.org/volunteer.html>) helps volunteers come together to provide various resources for Florida's foster care children. They organize events, lead supply drives, teach life skills, mentor, and solicit donations to benefit foster care children and their families.

The Guardian ad Litem office (<https://guardianadlitem.org/>) advocates for children in Florida's foster care systems. They have a child-focused approach to helping represent their legal and social needs in the community.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (<https://www.aecf.org/>) provides many valuable resources for foster care youth and their families, including leadership development, research publications, financial assistance and grants, equity and inclusion, juvenile justice advocacy, and advocacy for community change.

The Department of Children and Families website (<https://www.myflfamilies.com/service-programs/independent-living/tuition-fee-exemption.shtml>) lists information on tuition and fee exemption waivers that are available for eligible individuals.

Hope Florida (<https://www.myflfamilies.com/APathwaytoProsperity/>) is the Pathway to Prosperity program which provides hope navigators to help individuals reach economic self-sufficiency through counseling and community-based referrals.

Additional Resources

https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/sped_etds/52

<https://thesoh.org/about-us/foster-youth-statistics-need/>

<https://nationalhomeless.org/about-homelessness/>

https://www.nn4youth.org/wp-content/uploads/Issue-Brief_Consequences-of-Youth-Homelessness.pdf

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/index.html>

<https://nche.ed.gov/legislation/mckinney-vento/>

<https://www.aecf.org/topics/youth-in-transition>

<https://assets.aecf.org/m/blogimg/florida-fosteringyouth-transitions-2018.pdf>

<https://endhomelessness.org>

<http://floridacollegeaccess.org>

<https://ofhsoupkitchen.org/>

<https://thesoh.org>